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## Drug Court: a tough program'

By PEIJEAN TSAI/The Daily Journal

Eric Henson was ready for a change when he started Drug Court nearly two years ago.

The 29-year-old Ukiah man was plagued by dependency on methamphetamine, which he started using at 11. He lived out of his car and ate from trash cans. The addiction to the upper eventually caused him to rob a Redwood Valley gas station, landing him a 220-day jail sentence.

The sentence made Henson realize he wanted help for his drug problem. He spent two months in a jail cell writing letters to persuade county law enforcement to put him in a drug rehabilitation program.

"They weren't offering me any programs; they were just offering me jail," Henson said. "I needed help."

After months in jail, Henson was admitted into the county's adult Drug Court. The program is an alternative to jail or state prison for nonviolent offenders with drug-related crimes. Clients have to attend treatment on a regular basis and participate in recovery groups like Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous or religious organizations. They are regularly assessed by a Mendocino County Superior Court judge.

Twenty-one months after joining the program, Henson is staying sober and reunited with his wife and three children under a roof. He said he's learned self-respect, virtues and boundaries and now is focusing on his family and career.

"For years, I didn't know exactly who I was," Henson said.

Henson was one of seven graduates last week of the Adult Drug

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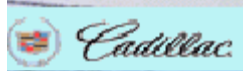
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Court. Participants typically stay in the program for about 22 months. But dropout rates are high for what participants call "the boot camp of treatment programs," said Dianne Marshall, therapeutic courts administrator.

According to Marshall, Mendocino County's Drug Court has a 65 percent retention rate. Out of those who stay, only about 29 percent graduate.

"It's a tough program," she said.

A requirement of the program is for participants to remain drug-free at least for the final three to six months before graduation. During participation, they have to be employed or attend school.

Though a challenge, the experience is worth it, Marshall said.

"The program does more to reduce the likelihood of further arrests than any other program for people with substance abuse or alcohol abuse and have committed crimes related to those," she said.

Those who drop out are faced with the jail or state prison sentence decreed to them before entering the program.

Napa resident Madonna Cruz said the program gave her her life back. She graduated last week after staying with the program since June 2002.

"It helped me out to become sober, and to have goals, and to have faith in myself," said Cruz, who struggled with methamphetamine abuse. "And to have a new set of friends that were clean and sober."

The program costs \$3,900 per person, and participants pay based on a sliding-scale income schedule. Those who cannot pay the full amount, which applies to most participants, do their portion of the cost's equivalent of 550 hours of community service.

Locally, the state-funded program began August 1996 in Mendocino County. Since its inception, 104 have graduated of the 316 adults participating in Drug Court.

But while it was not difficult for Henson to stay in the program, he has seen many drop out. The only people who can make it, he said, are those who are ready for the challenges of recovery and commitment to Drug Court.

"You have to be ready; you have to be open; you have to be willing," Henson said. "A lot take it to stay out of jail. They don't make it."

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